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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 000894

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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS ZIONIST LEADER SPECULATES RIGHT-WING
BLOC COULD FORM NEW GOVERNMENT

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

1. (C) Summary: National Union (NU) leader MK Benny Elon asserted to the Ambassador March 1 that the right-of-center parties will gain enough seats in the March 28 elections that they could (in the unlikely event they were asked to do so) form a government. He called Kadima an artificial political grouping, despite its current sustained lead in all polls, and claimed that most Israelis are still more right, than left, of center. Elon tied Hamas to a larger Islamic regional movement that he saw as including al Qaeda, and advocated that Israel work with Jordan and Egypt to achieve a regional solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, rather than work with the Palestinian Authority. Elon stressed his strong appreciation for U.S. support for Israel, and criticized what he termed Israel's financial dependence on the U.S., advocating instead that the money go to Jordan and Israel use the United States' and Israel's shared religious values to cement the relationship. End summary.

"Easy Money" Hurts Israel

2. (C) MK and Rabbi Binyamin (Benny) Elon, head of the recently merged National Union (NU)-National Religious Party (NRP) Knesset list, began his courtesy call on the Ambassador March 1 by expressing his appreciation for the strong U.S.-Israel relationship. Elon remarked, "It is a gift from God that there is one real 'empire' in the world and it is the United States." Elon underlined the need for Israel to "build the right bridge" with the U.S., rather than continue what he characterized as Israel's financial dependence on the U.S. Elon said he is the only MK that has shown "humility" about Israel receiving U.S. assistance. "We're not only 'schnorrers' (Yiddish for 'free-loaders, spongers')," Elon said, "but we're schnorrers with chutzpah." Elon worried that Israel's continued dependence on U.S. assistance could create a negative backlash in the U.S. against Israel, as well as against American Jews.

3. (C) Referring to the some five million U.S. Jews and what he assessed to be 60 million U.S. evangelical Christians, Elon advocated that Israel concentrate on building its relationship with the U.S. based on shared Judeo-Christian values. (Note: Elon served as tourism minister from 2001-2004, during which time he developed strong ties with the U.S. evangelical Christian community, stressing what he referred to as the Jewish people's biblical claim to the "greater Land of Israel," including the West Bank and Gaza. Prime Minister Sharon fired Elon in June 2004 for opposing the disengagement plan. End note.) Elon said that out of what he said is Israel's USD 60 billion budget -- without indicating for which fiscal year -- USD three billion came from the U.S. He underscored that cutting this amount "would not be the end of the world" for Israel. "It's easy money," Elon remarked, "and easy money spoils." Later in the conversation he advocated channeling this money into assistance for Jordan (see below).

Right-Wing Bloc to Overtake Kadima?

4. (C) In response to the Ambassador's query about election prospects for the NU-NRP, Elon claimed that polls indicate that his list would receive 11-12 Knesset seats if elections were held today, an increase, he claimed, of four seats since the two parties merged at the beginning of February. He assessed that the right-of-center parties, including Avigdor Lieberman's Russian-immigrant-oriented Yisrael Beiteinu party, will continue to grow. "I don't believe (Alternate PM Ehud) Olmert will be (the next) prime minister," Elon asserted, assessing that a right-of-center bloc composed of NU-NRP, Likud, Yisrael Beiteinu, and Shas could form the next government. (Note: Elon did not explain how it would transpire that Israel's President Katsav would not, as is customary, ask the party that receives the highest number of seats, most likely Kadima, to form the new government. End note.) Elon assessed that most Israelis are on the right, rather than left-of-center, and that this tendency is not easy to change. "Sharon created something artificial," Elon asserted, and added, "but maybe I'm wrong... we'll see."

5. (C) According to Elon, a right-of-center bloc could form

the next coalition if, as he hopes, Likud's support grows to 20 seats, Shas wins at least 10 seats, NU-NRP wins 15 seats, and Yisrael Beiteinu wins 10. When the Ambassador noted that this would still not reach the 61-seat majority, Elon claimed that, according to a recent poll, a gap of only nine seats currently exists for a right-of-center bloc to reach a Knesset majority. Elon acknowledged that the right-of-center parties will "have to work" to achieve success, and that they plan to "bypass the media" and run a door-to-door campaign. Elon assessed that Yisrael Beiteinu will focus on attracting the Russian-immigrant population, because that party appeals to that sector's secular agenda. "We're not trying to appeal to them," Elon said. He also noted that the NU-NRP merger had been difficult to achieve. Unlike the NU, the NRP has a problem with being referred to as a right-wing party, while, unlike the NRP, the NU tries to appeal to secular as well as religious voters.

Israel Should Focus on Alliance with Jordan, Egypt

16. (C) Turning to the Hamas election victory, Elon characterized Hamas's rise to power as "inevitable," and said it is superficial to blame Olmert for Hamas's success. He said that Hamas's victory represents part of a regional trend dominated by al Qaeda, which, he said, seeks to "break the idol" that America represents, and to show the Muslim world that America is weak and "is not such a story." He characterized Hamas as "very intellectual," as not corrupt, and as a movement that "really takes care of its people." In contrast, Elon referred to the PLO as "a bunch of gangsters." He stressed, however, that Hamas, as an extension of al Qaeda, represents a greater danger.

17. (C) Elon, who provided the Ambassador with a copy of his book, "God's Covenant with Israel," advocated that Israel focus on strengthening its relationships with Egypt and Jordan -- "the real partner" -- and that Israel support the moderate Arab influence in the region, including Palestinian Christians. He expressed disagreement with former Minister Natan Sharansky's emphasis on the need to support democratic governments, exclaiming, "So, Jordan and Egypt are not the best democracies, so what." He referred to his plan, "The Right Road to Peace," outlined in his book, in which he advocates recognition of Jordan as the Palestinian state and calls for Israeli sovereignty over the West Bank and Gaza. Elon asserted that creating "another entity" between Israel and Jordan would create a problem, and would "destroy Jordan." Elon said that if he were prime minister, he would give all U.S. assistance for Israel to Jordan instead, in order to "upgrade" Jordan's economy and support it as a moderate partner.

18. (C) Elon expressed the hope that Hamas's victory "will open people's eyes not to see the PA as a partner" as well as not to support additional unilateral moves. He criticized unilateral withdrawals and the separation barrier as turning a blind eye to the problem. The Ambassador agreed that unilateralism is not likely to provide a long-term solution to the conflict. Elon said that Sharon had speculated to him -- Elon did not indicate when -- that Israel would not have a partner and would have to implement unilateral moves. "(Sharon) believed he would set the borders," Elon said. "Sharon couldn't trust (Netanyahu) or Olmert" to do this, Elon said. "Only (Sharon) could do it."

Bio Note

19. (C) Elon was born in Jerusalem in 1954 and is a ninth generation Jerusalemite who, for the past 20 years, has lived in the West Bank settlement of Beit El. Elon is married and has six children and four grandchildren. He was recently diagnosed with cancer of the vocal chords and had surgery to remove a tumor in January 2006. Elon told the Ambassador that he is currently undergoing radiation treatment and that his doctor expects Elon will recover fully. Elon, whose voice sounded raspy, remarked that he had never smoked. Elon's English is very good and he indicated that he speaks some Arabic as well as Russian.

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